

Pentecost 5_YrC_Proper7_062313
All Saints Episcopal Church

*But Jesus sent him away, saying, "Return to your home,
and declare how much God has done for you."*

In the name of God. Amen.

One of the sometimes-stressful-but-not-uncommon tasks of the job of clergy in a near-downtown church is dealing with street people who turn up at the door with great regularity. After doing this full time for more than a few years now, I've decided that those who come here can be divided into three categories of folks.

Of course, one category is people who have legitimate needs and legitimate reasons why they cannot fulfill those needs by themselves. Maybe the power bill is higher than expected and he needs a little bit to help cover the whole amount due. Maybe she has to fix something in her car or a flat on his bicycle so they can get to their jobs. Maybe they are hungry and they're hoping we can give them some food. The one that always gets me the most are people who have just been let out of prison. The prison gives them \$10 or \$15 and a pat on the back, and expects them to find a job and a place to live. The first thing, of course, they need in order to get a job or a place to live is to get a proper ID from the Driver's License Office. It costs \$23.50, which they don't have, and if they did, they couldn't get all the way to Demetropolis Rd. without someone to take them. It is a vicious cycle.

The second category is the group of people who are trying to scam us. They 'tell their stories' about how they are down on their luck - the stories could possibly be true, I suppose, -- but you can see the big gaps in details. They want whatever we will give them - money, gasoline, food, coffee - and they are often very demanding. I am better at identifying these than I was at first, but not perfect.

The last group is harder to put a finger on. They are also down-on-their-luck folks, but they have another issue that makes things even more difficult: they are suffering from some sort of mental illness. It is difficult, if not next to impossible, therefore, for them to even articulate what they need, much less for us to be able to fulfill that need.

They have been turned away from mental clinics and hospitals and, perhaps, from their families as well. So they wander up and down the streets of Mobile, on the edges of the community - unknown, unheard, unwelcome. They are known by their symptoms instead of by who they are - the man who walks and walks and walks, always talking to himself; the woman with no expression on her face, who walks up and down the sidewalk as if she is in a trance; the man who cannot keep the thread of his conversation going from the beginning to the end of a sentence before getting distracted and changing the subject. Seldom does any one of them ask for something specific. They come in, sit awhile or continue standing while they talk - not to anyone in particular - until they lose interest and move on again. If we had access to their medical records, we would identify them by their diagnoses - schizophrenia, manic-depressive, multiple personality disorder, perhaps.

In today's Gospel lesson, we hear the story about the man who was possessed by demons - a diagnosis that is not in the latest edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders - but who is somebody we have all seen. He may even be someone we know. He's a man who has lost himself. He has been a normal man - a neighbor, a member of the community. But now he lives in death, "among the tombs" according to Luke, out beyond the city walls. He has nothing anymore - no home, no clothes, no name. He has no voice. When he opens his mouth, only the shrieks of the demons inside him come out. He is lost to himself and shattered into unrecognizable pieces of his former humanity. He is at the mercy of powers beyond his control, driven to the brink of existence.

In Luke's story, Jesus gets in a boat and crosses the lake of Galilee to the region of the Gerasenes. It is not in the territory of Israel, so everything there is 'unclean.' Right off the bat, Jesus notices this man inhabited by demons, as he noticed others who had been shut out and considered unclean. He orders them to come out. Then Jesus asks the man his name; but the demons answer: "Legion." This would not have been lost on Luke's audience - a Legion was the name for a group of 5,000 Roman soldiers. This man was the most untouchable in a land of untouchables!

After the demons had come out of the man, the people came to see what was going on. They found the man in his right mind, clothed again, like normal, and sitting at the feet of Jesus. And those who had been present when the demons were cast out told the rest of the crowd how the man had been healed.

It should not come as a surprise that the Gerasenes were afraid because of what had happened and they told Jesus they wanted him to leave. How often are we afraid of change that comes unexpectedly? Sometimes even a good change is unwanted; we are more comfortable with what we have known, whether it was good or bad.

But the man who was healed responded another way. Instead of being afraid, he became a disciple. He wanted to stay with Jesus, but Jesus sent him off to tell his story of healing. And so he went, embracing his new life and proclaiming the good news of his newfound freedom.

Jesus healed not only the one man, but the community as well. He did that every time he healed someone by confronting the powers that tear us from wholeness, from one another, that oppress and divide us.

In the second lesson today, Paul names the deep divisions of his society - between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female - and names the truth that in Christ these divisions are to be overcome.

There are more such divisions in our world today. Rich and poor. Black and white. Gay and straight. Christian and Muslim -- a thousand varieties of hardness of heart that shut out some people, and shut us in just as definitely. But in Christ we are all children of God through faith - no one less worthy of decent food and clean water, shelter, medicine, or education, of love and hope.

In Christ we are empowered to name that truth and we are called to name and confront the powers that conceal it. And as we follow Jesus, as we participate in his ministry of healing and reconciliation in the world, we find that the outcast who is restored is not the only one who is saved. We were made for the unity with one another and with God that was and is Christ's mission; and the healing of a breach with a sister or brother is also restoration for the whole Body.

Have you ever experienced that? Have you caught a glimpse of what it might be like for each one of us when all of us live as God's children? Declare how much God has done for you. Declare what Jesus is doing for the poor and outcast. If you find yourself feared as they were -- as Jesus was in the city after he healed the Gerasene demoniac -- name that too, as you pray and work for reconciliation.

We are of the Body of Christ, sharing in Christ's power to heal, Christ's mission, and Christ's wholeness. Faith has come, and with it the hope and love that sees every child as a child of promise.

Thanks be to God!